



**QUEEN'S
UNIVERSITY
BELFAST**

Female Alliances: Gender, Identity and Friendship in Early Modern Britain, by Amanda Herbert (review no. 1735)

Hannan, L. (2015). Female Alliances: Gender, Identity and Friendship in Early Modern Britain, by Amanda Herbert (review no. 1735). *Reviews in History*. <https://doi.org/10.14296/RiH/2014/1735>, <https://doi.org/10.1017/jbr.2015.76>

Published in:
Reviews in History

Document Version:
Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

Queen's University Belfast - Research Portal:
[Link to publication record in Queen's University Belfast Research Portal](#)

Publisher rights

© The Author 2015

This is an open access article published under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike License (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/3.0/>), which permits use, distribution and reproduction for non-commercial purposes, provided the author and source are cited and new creations are licensed under the identical terms.

General rights

Copyright for the publications made accessible via the Queen's University Belfast Research Portal is retained by the author(s) and / or other copyright owners and it is a condition of accessing these publications that users recognise and abide by the legal requirements associated with these rights.

Take down policy

The Research Portal is Queen's institutional repository that provides access to Queen's research output. Every effort has been made to ensure that content in the Research Portal does not infringe any person's rights, or applicable UK laws. If you discover content in the Research Portal that you believe breaches copyright or violates any law, please contact openaccess@qub.ac.uk.

Reviews in History

Published on *Reviews in History* (<http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews>)

Female Alliances: Gender, Identity and Friendship in Early Modern Britain

Review Number: 1735

Publish date: Thursday, 26 February, 2015

Author: Amanda Herbert

ISBN: 9780300177404

Date of Publication: 2014

Price: £40.00

Pages: 224pp.

Publisher: Yale University Press

Publisher url: <http://yalepress.yale.edu/yupbooks/BookJacket.asp?isbn=9780300177404>

Place of Publication: New Haven, CT

Reviewer: Leonie Hannan

Amanda E. Herbert's fresh and important study of women's alliances in early modern Britain opens with a quotation from Mary Evelyn listing the duties of elite women in the late 17th century. Reading as follows: 'the care of children's education, observing a husband's commands, assisting the sick, relieving the poor, and being serviceable to our friends' (p. 1). Herbert suggests that the last of these duties has been over-looked by historical scholarship to date. Moreover, as Herbert makes clear, this subject has much wider ramifications for our understanding of early modern life, as the bonds forged by individual women translated into powerful networks, underpinning and influencing the larger workings of society and empire. Herbert's choice of the word 'alliance' as opposed to 'friendship' is key as it enables her analysis to emphasise the role of power relations between women and to highlight the practical utility of these relationships, without denying the emotional content of many female friendships. This book shows that female friendship is a serious matter worthy of proper scholarly consideration. Herbert's analysis of female alliances also makes an important contribution to debates on the construction of identity, nationality and gender in early modern Britain. The book moves deftly between the details of individual women's domestic experiences and larger questions concerning the agency of women in early modern society. Whilst there has been some excellent recent scholarship on the topic of masculinity and male homo-social behaviours in the 18th century, this study brings to the fore the way female homo-sociability operated within early modern society. As such, this book makes a really valuable contribution to the field.

As Amanda Herbert's work is firmly focused on female community it has much less to say about men or cross-gender relationships such as marriage. This is to be expected in a volume that wishes to place female relationships centre stage. In the last decade or two the field of 'women's history' has largely been abandoned in favour of the more encompassing study of 'gender history' and research on men and masculinity has flourished as a result. In this context, studies such as *Female Alliances* that focus strongly on female gender identities play an important role in further developing our understandings

of women's lives in this period.

The book presents six chapters focused on distinct aspects of female alliance-making and maintenance. Amanda Herbert describes her chapters as a series of 'interlocking and interrelated microhistories' (p. 17), each illustrating a different feature of female alliance-making and which collectively encompass a wide range of contexts from domestic spaces to the alien environments of foreign travel. Herbert uses a wide range of sources including women's writing broadly defined (such as recipe books, account books, diaries and letters), material culture, print and visual culture. The analysis engages meaningfully with current interest amongst historians in material culture and space by exploring how material things, such as home-made gifts, informed and expressed female friendship. The book deals with spaces as diverse as kitchens, dairies, Quaker meeting houses, spas and prison cells and Herbert's attention to the spatial dimension adds significantly to her analysis of how relationships operated.

The book opens with a discussion of how social cohesiveness operated in an age of growing commerce and movement across the British Empire and argues that women were 'highly implicated in the process of forming and maintaining friendships and familial connections abroad as well as at home' (p. 3). The introduction deals with the backdrop of 20th-century feminist history that informs the subject of this book. However, Herbert seeks to complicate the over-idealised narratives of female community generated by early feminist historians and to make clear the distinctions that existed around social status, race, nationality, employment, education and religion. Nevertheless, Herbert acknowledges her debt to the scholars who have gone before her, in particular Amy Froide, Naomi Tadmor and Karin Wulf, whose work crucially established the importance of female community and women's networks in early modern society. Herbert also avoids compartmentalising women by making it clear that women might move between social groups and that meaningful bonds existed between women of different ranks. Social status mediated female friendship but it did not entirely predict it.

From the outset, this book makes a case for the importance of prescriptive literature in guiding women's beliefs, writings and social behaviours. This argument is most strongly put forward in chapter one, which focuses on the language of female alliances, but it is returned to periodically throughout the book. This is the one feature of Herbert's analysis that I find problematic and which, I think, begs further questions. The scope of *Female Alliances* is broad, as Herbert has mined sources from England, Wales and Scotland and also the British colonies of Ireland, the West Indies and America. Moreover, Herbert is not satisfied with presenting a narrative of elite life and has worked hard to tease out evidence of lower status women's alliances. In fact, a real strength of the book is the illumination of interactions between women of very different social standing, which complicates our view of the functioning of social bonds in this period. However, this encompassing approach to the subject is delivered through a series of micro-studies and whilst these are diverse in terms of topic, they are highly focused analyses of particular individuals and contexts. In this way, Herbert presents the reader with an ambitious text that does not disappoint in terms of rigour and detail, but which highlights the need for further detailed studies on this subject.

Chapter one begins with an interesting exploration of idealised female friendship, looking at how early modern writing on friendship connected with and diverged from Classical and Christian models. Amanda Herbert explains how women appropriated traditional models of perfect friendship and adapted them to their own ends. Here, Herbert makes it clear that whilst prescriptions for female behaviour 'urged them to be obdurate and resigned' women in fact 'manipulated stereotypes about so-called feminine emotions in expressing their affection for one another' (p. 37). Further on, Herbert argues that women 'strategically ignored medical and scientific prescriptions' (p. 38) which suggested that they ought to control their natural emotions. However, when it comes to a section on epistolary texts, Herbert finds women to be much more dependent on prescription, stating that 'Literate women learned practical and moral letter-writing and moral letter-writing methods from published self-help guides' (pp. 38–9). This section goes on to argue not only that women drew heavily on letter-writing

guides in the construction of their own epistles, but that women learned about the importance of letter-writing as a means of forging alliances from these texts. This statement prompts a couple of questions. Firstly, was it not possible that women learned how to write letters from a variety of sources, not least the educational practice of writing letters in childhood, from letters received by family members and read aloud around the dinner table, or from letters personally received? I would add to that a question about how women might perceive the importance of using correspondence to further friendships and allegiances with others – surely it was possible for women to understand the social power of letter-writing without the help of a guide? Where Amanda Herbert attributes causation to the reading of prescriptive literature, I would tend to see a wide range of influences at work, not least girls' formative experiences as members of a family, as beneficiaries of a domestic education, as young participants in neighbourhood sociability and as increasingly independent communicators within wider networks of contacts. The discussion of the role of prescriptive literature in predicting human behaviour sometimes feels a bit chicken and egg in nature. For example, on the one hand Herbert contends that women made pledges of fidelity to one another in their letters 'thereby indicating that they generally followed the guidelines laid out in prescriptive literature' but likewise acknowledges the many advantages such pledges brought women, such as the ability to cultivate friendships across large distances, a benefit that must have been self-evidently apparent. Whilst I do not want to entirely dismiss the influence of prescriptive literature (it was after all a much-read genre) I do think it is difficult to argue in favour both of women's exercise of agency through the manipulation of societal norms *and* of their ultimate reliance on published guides to life.

Chapter two provides a fascinating examination of issues such as luxury, skill and social status in the making, offering and receiving of gifts. Amanda Herbert demonstrates that elite women used gift-giving to confirm shared status, interests, tastes and values with other high-ranking women. Alert to the importance of decision-making around choice of materials in home-made gifts, Herbert illuminates the interesting detail of a female culture of gift making and giving. From here, chapter three moves the discussion on to examine other forms of domestic production that women engaged in cooperatively. This chapter unpacks how female alliances were formed between women of differing social status, as they worked together on shared tasks in the home. Amanda Herbert makes good use of some of the images included in domestic manuals to explore different kinds of cooperative labour within the household. This section does return to the notion that women's approaches to household work were shaped by reading prescriptive literature on the subject: 'These injunctions about female behaviour and comportment (such as love and kindness in childcare; calmness in the kitchen and harmonious working relationships with others) were reinforced as they were drawn into the domestic scenes that accompanied women's prescriptive guides' (p. 96). Again, I would question the notion that women mainly relied on guidebooks to inform their approach to communal work and suggest instead that there were many compelling sources for such ideas, not least the Bible, sermons and lessons from their own mothers. However, as Herbert's detailed work with women's manuscript recipe books clearly shows 'By asserting their own knowledge, creativity, and capability, female authors of manuscript recipe books set their works apart from printed recipe collections' (p. 113).

Chapter four marks a turning point in the book, as Herbert's analysis begins to make connections across urban spaces and national borders starting with a detailed analysis of female social relations at the spa. This chapter contributes a much-needed discussion of the spa in pre-Georgian times and the analysis draws together the themes of sharing medical advice and gifting confectionary and handicrafts that are prominent in previous chapters and places them in an alternative, urban context. Chapter five takes an even more dramatic shift away from the comforts of domestic life, with a thrilling exploration of Quaker companionship and in particular the experiences of Quaker 'yokemates' – women who embarked on lengthy and dangerous journeys with the intention of preaching their faith. After the multiple Quaker travellers and the many miles traversed in chapter five, Herbert's last chapter explores one woman's relationships with faith and community – the Dissenting diarist, Sarah Savage. This chapter provides an example of a woman's rejection of the expected bonds of female community on the basis of her religious conviction and preferred personal habits. This example not only demonstrates that women were capable of carving a different path from

the prescribed norms, but also illustrates the detrimental repercussions of refusing to engage with local female networks. However, in Savage's diary there is evidence of her choice of an alternative female community: the future generations of Nonconformist women who she expected might read her text. Sarah Savage provides a fantastic case study and Herbert makes really useful connections between the particularities of Savage's situation and the wider analysis of female alliances presented in the book as a whole. Like any case study, this chapter's findings might be accused of being un-generalizable – but against the backdrop of Herbert's detailed and wide-ranging archival research this unusual woman's experiences sit well and provide an important counterpoint to the more normative examples explored elsewhere in the book. These last two powerful micro-histories of Quaker and Dissenting individuals might also point the way for future studies exploring the qualities of female religious friendship and community that existed in a range of contexts in this period. These chapters certainly prompt questions about how religious allegiances related to (and sometimes challenged) bonds of marriage, family and neighbourhood.

Female Alliances concludes with an epilogue presenting Mary Parker's highly-charged correspondence with her friend, Sarah Jennings. These concluding pages stress the emotional dimension of female alliances and they reveal a key strength of this book. The view of female alliances presented by Amanda Herbert emphasises that relationships between women could be – amongst other things – useful, financially beneficial, spiritually enhancing, socially expected, societally sanctioned, emotional and controversial. Friendships might be highly contingent on a particular place or space, but they could likewise flourish across great distances via the medium of correspondence and the exchange of useful information. This presentation of female alliances in all their complexity and diversity makes Herbert's contribution really compelling. Personally, I would question the emphasis placed on prescriptive literature as a predictor of female behaviours, especially when the wealth of the author's archival research speaks for itself and presents a novel and nuanced view of female friendship and the mechanisms that maintained it. Overall, *Female Alliances* offers weighty research that enlivens our understanding of female agency in the early modern period and does so by emphasising the importance of community over individualised autonomy. This perspective has implications for our studies of gender identities, as Herbert sees women's identities as being 'created through relational acts of sociability' (p. 13) whether that be the giving of a gift or the sharing of domestic labour.

To sum up, this is a beautifully written and insightfully argued work, based on meticulous primary research. *Female Alliances* illuminates an important and over-looked subject in early modern history and will, no doubt, prompt further research and debate on female community in this period. Amanda Herbert achieves her aim of making detailed micro-histories answer the big questions of gender and identity in an era when British people became trans-Atlantic citizens.

Other reviews:

Reviews in History Interview

<http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews/review/1630> [2]

Source URL: <http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews/review/1735>

Links:

[1] <http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews/item/92188>

[2] <http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews/review/1630>